

Unlimited semiosis, intertextuality and ex- centricity in umberto



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Dicle Erbay AKE 612/712 Assist. Prof. Dr. Bilge Mutluay UNLIMITED SEMIOSIS, INTERTEXTUALITY AND EX-CENTRICITY IN UMBERTO ECO'S THE NAME OF THE ROSE The title of The Name of the Rose suggests many interpretations about the thick book at first glance. Umberto Eco talks about this first impression and why he chose this title for his book in his expository article he published in *Alphabeta* called "Postille" (after). He says that the idea for the title was coincidental and he liked it at the first thought because the rose is such a meaningful and symbolic object that it actually lost its original meaning- having almost no meaning.

After giving many references of the rose (The War of the Roses, The Rosencrantz Cult, Gertrude Stein's poem Sacred Emily), Eco explains that a potential reader would be baffled by such a title as it both meant everything and nothing at the same time. It would be impossible for him/her to reach up to a quick conclusion; in fact, that conclusion is never to come. The title of a book, he concludes, should stumble up ideas, not put them in order. This explanation actually is a small prototype of the entire book in terms of its meaning and "conclusion".

The Name of the Rose is a book that has a multiplicity of meanings, an unlimited intertextuality, and an important theme of ex-centricity. However even this explicit announcement made for the title does not satisfy some result-obsessed people who continually ask Eco why he has chosen that title upon which he answers in his article "Reading My Readers": "Because Pinocchio and SnowWhite were already copyrighted" (Eco 819). He seems to have become overwhelmed but his answer is not that silly either. He continues: "My simplistic answer concealed the fact that authors do not

speak in the void and are determined- and even ensured- by previous texts". Even such debate over the title only captures the importance of intertextuality for both Eco and his book. In this sense, *The Name of the Rose* is a book all about other books. In the same article, Eco goes on to explain how to interpret a text with neither consulting the author nor falling for quick conclusions. "The text is there. Narrators, as well as poets, should never be able to provide interpretations of their own work. A text is a machine conceived for eliciting interpretations. When one has a text to question, it is irrelevant to question the author" (Eco 820).

Still, Eco must have felt to bring some clarifications upon some academics that had fallen into the pit of symbolic explanations for Eco's work. Some wrong interpretations included "fishing for ultraviolet analogies" by a "paranoid reader". What he did was to code a series of characters in one of his *Foucault's Pendulum* according to their initial letters; Abulafia, Belbo, Casaubon, and Diotallevi, making a pattern of ABCD. Another thing he tried to do was to attribute J&B label to Jacopo Belbo as he is a heavy whiskey drinker.

Umberto Eco's answer to these cryptograms (which he sees as "interpretive waste") are surprisingly patient: "The alphabetical series ABCD is textually irrelevant if the names of the other characters do not bring it to X, Y, and Z; and Belbo drinks martinis and furthermore his mild addiction to alcohol is not the most relevant of his features"(Eco 824). Although Eco highlights intertextuality and symbolic references, he is never too simple to connect them to trivial pursuits. Thus, he obviously needed to describe a model

reader for his works to be understood accordingly: “ A text is a device conceived in order to produce its Model Reader.

Such a reader is not the one who makes the “ only right” conjecture. A text can foresee a Model Reader entitled to try infinite conjectures” (Eco 821). Therefore, the readers of *The Name of the Rose*, instead of trying to achieve one single meaning, should be open to a multiple and diverse of meanings so that the text can be achieved. The author should also be aware of this fact; when he writes a book and publishes it, it will be open to anyone who reads it and it will be open to interpretations not according to the author’s intentions but by a complex strategy of interactions.

Applying the Model Reader to *The Name of the Rose*, Eco says in “ Postille” that he wants an accomplice for his game. While he was writing, he wanted to be completely specific to the Middle Ages and he wanted to live in the Middle Ages as if it were his own age (and vice versa). Simultaneously he wished for a reader who would fall victim to him, or rather his book and would want nothing more than the book presents him. Then he directly speaks to the reader: In short, I will present you so much of Latin, few women, abundant theology, litres of blood as in *Grand Guignol* that you will say “ But this is wrong!

I am out! ” There, at that moment you will belong to me and you will feel the shiver of the eternal almightiness of God who baffles the order of the world. Then, if you are smart, you will realize how I have entrapped you, because in the long run I have been telling you this with each step; I have been warning you well about the fact that I have been dragging you into ending up in hell. Yet the best thing about the contracts made with Satan is that people’s

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knowingly signing it with whom they are doing business. Otherwise what is the deal about hell and rewarding anyway? my translation 655) What he is doing here is to play with the conventions of the novel, which would normally and readily accept any eager reader submerging oneself in the book, resting peacefully in between its orderly pages without any threat or trap, and ending smoothly in the bliss of closure. He is questioning and playing with those conventions by threatening his readers and proving his postmodern attitudes towards his act of writing as well as his readers. In order to reach a full understanding of a text, Eco has his theoretical explanations about signs that constitute texts.

The Name of the Rose will reveal itself more in his article "The Theory of Signs and the Role of the Reader". He talks about the freedom of use of a text and goes on to say: A text is [not] a clear crystal-clear structure interpretable in a single way; on the contrary, a text is a lazy machinery which forces its possible readers to do a part of its textual work, but the modalities of the interpretive operations-albeit multiple, and possibly infinite-are by no means indefinite and must be recognized as imposed by the semiotic strategies displayed by the text. 36) We are again made aware of the plurality of meanings of a text and its certain boundaries made out of semiotics. Every single sign works with its context and they help us in the process of understanding what we are reading (or seeing). "If signs were not endowed with a certain text-oriented meaning metaphors would not work, and every metaphor would only say that a thing is a thing" (37).

Therefore we need the theory of signs for a clean interpretation: In order to understand, then, how a text can be not only generated but also interpreted,

one needs a set of semantico-pragmatic rules, organized by an encyclopedia-like semantic representation, which establish how and under which conditions the addressee of a given text is entitled to collaborate in order to actualize what the text actually says. (43) The Name of the Rose is a huge pool of signs and unlimited semiosis from which the reader is challenged to absorb every meaning and not to choose only one out of all those choices.

It is such a thin line between coming to an understanding of a whole set of meanings at the same time without feeling overwhelmed and drowning in the ocean of signs in case of attempting to pin them all. Rather than coming to a conclusion, the book has infinite layers of a rose, from which the reader cannot reach a final meaning. The point is to derive pleasure from the process of meaning, not its closure. Adso also is a naive reader who should learn this notion throughout the book.

One critic named Rocco Capozzi interprets Adso's development under the light of Peircean ideas: On his journey-and it is most appropriate that a "novice," in his gradual formation, should learn through the experience of a journey (one of the main, and most obvious, over coded symbols of The Rose) Adso learns from William that the nature of books is similar to the nature of "signs." As he loses more and more of his naivete, and as he acquires more and more what Peirce calls "logica docens," Adso learns to accept that when speaking of signs, he "can always and only speak of something that speaks . . . of something else"; perhaps without ever arriving at the "final something"-at the "true one". This is only one of the many clear "traces" of Peirce's principle of unlimited semiosis in The Rose. (416) Adso

questions William's method of logic in trying to disclose the murders in the monastery as the latter seems to delay the solutions rather than reaching to them. He addresses Adso: Solving the mystery is not the same as deducing from first principles. Nor does it amount simply to collecting a number of particular data from which to infer a general law.

It means, rather, facing one or two or three particular data apparently with nothing in common, and trying to imagine whether they could represent so many instances of a general law you don't yet know, and which perhaps has never been pronounced. [. . .] In the face of some inexplicable facts you must try to imagine many general laws, whose connection with your facts escapes you. Then suddenly, in the unexpected connection of a result, a specific situation, and one of those laws, you perceive a line of reasoning that seems more convincing than the others.

You try applying it to all similar cases, to use it for making predictions, and you discover that your intuition was right. But until you reach the end you will never know which predicates to introduce into your reasoning and which to omit. And this is what I am doing now. I line up so many disjointed elements and I venture some hypothesis. I have to venture many, and many of them are so absurd that I would be ashamed to tell them to you. (295-296) William is the critical or the Model reader that Eco yearns for. While reading the book, the reader's attitude toward it should be like William's method.

Adso, on the other hand is the naive reader who cares more about a single truth rather than enjoying the process. Adso wants to hear about the truth in vain: - But then ... you are still far from the solution. - I am very close to one, <https://assignbuster.com/unlimited-semiosis-intertextuality-and-ex-centricity-in-umberto/>

but I don't know which. - Therefore you don't have a single answer to your questions? - Adso, if I did I would teach theology in Paris. - In Paris do they always have the true answer? - Never, but they are very sure of their errors.

(297) It is also possible to see William here as a different type of monk- he questions everything; even God's word, yet not so openly.

Still, his novice loses some of his respect towards him upon hearing there is not a single truth. He is worried about the murders and impatient to solve it immediately. He thinks that William is wasting time and disregarding the horrible events in the monastery: I had the impression that William was not at all interested in the truth, which is nothing but the adjustment between the thing and the intellect. On the contrary, he amused himself by imagining how many possibilities were possible. At that moment, I confess, I despaired of my master and caught myself thinking, ' Good thing the inquisitor has come. I was on the side of that thirst for truth that inspired Bernard Gui.

(297) While we are enjoying the process of reading *The Name of the Rose*, we are presented with countless references from various writers, thinkers, poets, and so on. These references are not directly there in front of our eyes but the competent reader is quick to grab the source of the references he has known. They are so absorbed in the text that only what the reader knows is available to him/her. Capozzi defines *The Name of the Rose* " as a mosaic of books- as a novel of books within books, and of signs and a system of signs within other systems" (417).

Intertextuality is another important aspect of *The Name of the Rose* which adds to the multiplicity of meanings. In fact, Eco's novel is a perfect example of conscious (and unconscious) " hybridization"; it is a text in which many

other texts merge, fuse, collide, intersect, speak to, and illuminate, one another-each with its own language and "ideologue." The Rose, succinctly put, is a skillful (con)structure of an intentionally ambiguous, polyvalent, and self-reflexive novel in-tended to generate multiple meanings.

Moreover, it is a novel which wishes to be: an intersection of textual "traces" and "textures"; a dialogue with many texts; and a literary text generated through the end-less process of writing and reading, re-writing and re-reading, etc. Looking for the sources of these references, however, is a futile journey in reading the book. If overemphasized this practice undermines "the whole strategy of overtly using quotations and intertextuality as a foreseen textual strategy for generating other texts" (Capozzi 414).

It also overlooks Eco's way of literary journey through encyclopedia of literature in the act of writing and ignores the re-writing and re-reading other texts as a text or an interrelationship of different discourses and meanings. Many critics has found in The Name of the Rose references from several writers such as William of Occam, Roger Bacon, Alessandro Manzoni, Jorge L. Borges, Conan Doyle, Michail Bakhtin, Charles S. Peirce, Jury Lotman, Roland Barthes, Maria Corti, Eco's own theoretical and journalistic writings, and so on.

The ultimate reference seems to be to the Bible as the books starts like Genesis and ends in an Apocalypse, adding the seven-day creation in the storyline by giving the account of the events in a week. It is also possible to see Bakhtin in Adso's carnivalesque dream and the side ornaments that Adelmo draws on books. But the most significant of the references is undoubtedly to Borges as the book is so full of Borgesian elements like <https://assignbuster.com/unlimited-semiosis-intertextuality-and-ex-centricity-in-umberto/>

labyrinth, library, books about books and mirror that in fact some critics even claim that the true author of *The Name of the Rose* is Borges- not Eco.

The most striking reference to Borges seems to be the name of the murderer: Jorge de Burgos. Eco personally answers to those who ask why the character's name evokes the writer and why he is such a bad figure: " I do not know it myself, either. I was in need of a blind man in charge of the library (that seemed to be a good idea to me); and a blind library only begets Borges; because everything has a price" (my translation 644). It is also a revelation of his debts to Borges. In fact not only more than a few elements in the book are Borgesian but also Eco's interpretation of a text finds its roots in the writer.

Borges is known to see a book as a dialogue in which it engages with the reader and he does not accept it as an isolated entity. Moreover, Borges uses " a painstaking description of characters, dates, recondite historical facts, erudite philosophical debates, and detailed bibliographical references, each of which serves to blur the border between reality and imagination" (all of which is visible in *The Name of the Rose*) in the beginning paragraphs of many of his short stories (Corry 428).

By such a detailed introduction, the reader is invited not to question the reality of the reported facts. Furthermore, " the profusion of characters, the scholarly questions, and the endless references to books and writers" also tell us that we are surrounded by a Borgesian jungle. Many short stories of Borges are also alluded to in the book. " A library representing the universe, its structure of a complicated and large labyrinth, the possibility of knowing the secrets of the world", all remind us " *The Library of Babel*".

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William's role as a detective trying to "decipher the secret interior of the library only through examination of its exterior and with the help of mathematics" is similar to the detective Eric Lonrot in "Death and the Compass" (Corry 428-429). The similarities are so many to count but Eco's debt to Borges is undeniably great. The final significant feature of *The Name of the Rose* that I am going to mention is its central theme of "ex-centricity". It is the story of those who are driven away from the centre, the system and it is mostly used in historiographic metafiction.

The characters in the book are continuously struggling in and out of the centre. William and Adso are trying to enter the center of the library, Franciscans are trying to enter the center of the Church by making Avignon accept Jesus Christ's poverty and Jorge is trying to keep his central position by protecting library at the cost of his and anybody else's life. However, the ex-centrics in the book are mostly seen to establish their own meta-narrative; and thus creating their own circle. The most striking example is of the lepers.

They are "misshapen, their flesh [is] decaying and all whitish, [they are] hobbling on their crutches, with swollen eyelids, bleeding eyes." They do not "speak or shout"; they "twitter like mice" (192). William explains their ex-centricity: "For the Christian people they are others, those who remain on the fringe of the flock. The flock hates them, they hate the flock, who wish all lepers like them would die. [...] The flock is like a series of concentric circles, from the broadest range of the flock to its immediate surroundings.

The lepers are a sign of exclusion in general" (197-198). But the main point is revealed when William talks about the circles and their surroundings in general through the lepers' exclusion as heretics: "This is the illusion of
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heresy. Everyone is heretical, everyone is orthodox. The faith of a movement proclaims doesn't count: what counts is the hope it offers. All the heresies are the banner of a reality, an exclusion. Scratch the heresy and you will find the leper. Every battle against heresy wants only this: to keep the leper as he is" (194).

The point is not to find a compromise or a remedy for the outsiders in all power relations but to keep them where they are. The Franciscans are also mostly desired to be excluded rather than to be listened and be given some credit. Instead of sharing an ocean of knowledge with the rest of the world, Jorge prefers keeping it all to himself for his own interpretation of order and submission and even kills himself by eating the poisoned pages of the book and burns the library. The meta-narrative, the center of the circle is so strong that its total destruction is more acceptable than its break.

The argument of under which category *The Name of the Rose* is heated. It was labeled by many critics as: metaphysical, mystery, detective or anti-detective story, post-modern, historical, bildungsroman, gothic or essay novel, and so on. My impression is that the book might be all of this and none of this at the same time. Linda Hutcheon puts it under the category of historiographic metafiction the definition of which is in the follows: Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction.

And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the " world" and literature.

The textual incorporation of these intertextual past(s) as a constitutive

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structural element of postmodernist fiction functions as a formal marking of historicity-both literary and "worldly." At first glance it would appear that it is only its constant ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity that distinguishes postmodern parody from medieval and Renaissance imitation (see Greene 17). ...] Nevertheless, a distinction should be made: "Traditionally, stories were stolen, as Chaucer stole his; or they were felt to be the common property of a culture or community ... These notable happenings, imagined or real, lay outside language the way history itself is supposed to, in a condition of pure occurrence" (Gass 147). [...] The intertextual parody of historiographic metafiction enacts, in a way, the views of certain contemporary historiographers (see Canary and Kozicki): it offers a sense of the presence of the past, but this is a past that can only be known from its texts, its traces-be they literary or historical.

We are welcomed by Eco's efforts to legalize the reality of his book; the book we are holding in our hands is actually a combination and edited version of many other writers other than Adso. The book is recorded by an Abbe named Vallet and it is the French translated manuscript of Dom J. Mabillon's print, the author of which is Dom Adso of Melk. The book is made out of scattered notes, edited many times and travelled the most challenging journey- yet we have it in full and large form as it is. The suspense is there: what to believe in and what not to is always a mystery. The author as lost his authority by distancing himself from the origins of the book so far away that the reader does not give himself totally to what he has to say- there is a continuous and ongoing questioning. The intertextuality of the book is another marking of both literary and "worldly" historicity as Hutcheon says. It is a reminder of

the past that we can never be sure to refer except from textual remaining. As the last line of the book suggests: " Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus. " [1] ----- [1] Once a rose exists with its name, in our hands only names remain (my translation).